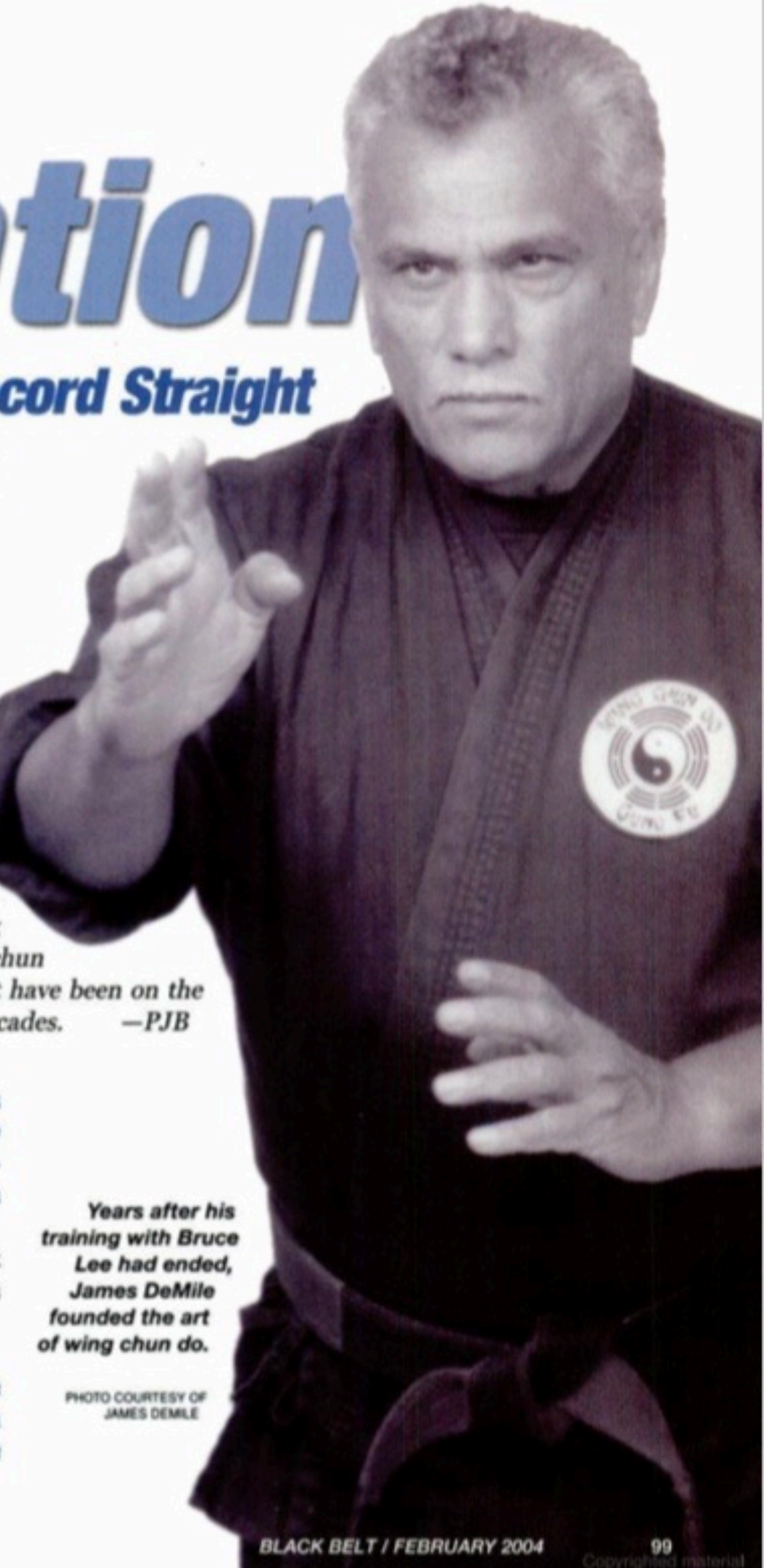
Bruce Lee's First Generation

James DeMile Sets the Record Straight Regarding the Early Years of Jeet Kune Do

Interview by Paul J. Bax



Years after his training with Bruce Lee had ended, James DeMile founded the art of wing chun do.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES DEMILE

Bruce Lee lived in Seattle from 1959 to 1964, and during that time, he collected an inner circle of students who would become known as the first generation. James DeMile was one of those early disciples, having started training with Lee in 1959 and continued until 1962. In numerous interviews, the former Air Force heavyweight boxing champion has covered topics that ranged from how he and Lee met to how they trained. In this Black Belt exclusive, DeMile, who later founded the art of wing chun do, revisits some of those issues to clarify questions that have been on the minds of martial artists and Bruce Lee aficionados for decades. —PJB

Black Belt: Recently, the Jun Fan Jeet Kune Do Nucleus dissolved. Years before that, the same fate befell the JKD Society. Is it a lost cause for Bruce Lee students like yourself to try to organize an association to disseminate his teachings?

James DeMile: Yes. There is not one voice, but many; yet none of them knows what Bruce really meant in his thoughts and teachings.

BB: It seems as though all his students claim to have learned the best of his theories and techniques, but you have said he never taught anyone how to beat him. Please explain.

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Bruce Lee and James DeMile met in this parking lot during the late 1950s and early '60s for their workouts.

DeMile: It's a very important statement and easily understood by anyone who wanted to be the best, developed a way to achieve it and then realized that if you show it to someone, they would improve on it and beat you. The reason I broke away from Bruce's classes in *jun fan* was that he left out pieces of the puzzle that made everything work. He de-emphasized the centerline, closed *bi jong* (ready stance) and spring energy. He continued this way of teaching in *jeet kune do*. Bruce could make jun fan and JKD work because he had the basics. In all the years I have known people who trained in anything Bruce taught in his later periods, I have never known them to use the basic concepts as Bruce applied them.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL J. BAX



Jesse Glover (left) and author Paul J. Bax (center) pose with James DeMile at the first meeting of the Jun Fan Jeet Kune Do Nucleus.

BB: You once said, "Bruce never taught the applied concept of the surge punch because he felt to do so would invite someone to beat him."

DeMile: [That brings up] the two-seconds-or-less concept. Bruce knew that if you had a single punch that would bring down anyone, it could be used against him. The punch seems to be more exposed [these days], yet I find the application is still missing. Being able to hit hard and being able to hit your target are two different things.

BB: Lee reportedly told you: "If a person learns my punching and closing techniques, that's all he needs to know. With the element of surprise, you can just leap in like a bolt of lightning and blow anyone away regardless of his rank or style." In today's world of grappling-related arts, do you believe Lee could still make his punches work that well?

DeMile: Without a doubt. You must remember that most grapplers are willing to leap in and take a punch in order to take the opponent down. In most cases, this can work. Bruce was like a shadow that always seemed to disappear, no matter how fast you attacked. He would hit you at angles. He could dislocate your jaw, crush your temple, crack your clavicle or split a muscle—all in less than a blink. While you were rushing [in] all protected, he would redirect your energy and

Remembering the 'Dragon'

Years ago, James DeMile launched a project that would have culminated in the production of a film called *Bruce Lee: The Little Dragon*. Unfortunately, it was never completed.

"Sad to say, I am still trying to have it produced," DeMile says. "[There has been] a lot of interest over the years, but not when it comes to handing over the check. It looks like I will have to shoot it on video as a personal biography and sell it over the Internet."

One of DeMile's stumbling blocks involved finding just the right person to portray Lee. "I found a lot of look-alikes, but none that could act and talk like Bruce," he says. —*PJB*

spring-load your awkward position, then fire at any number of targets.

BB: You said you once engaged in a conversation with Dan Inosanto about several tournament champions who had sparred with Lee and failed to score. Can you expound on that?

DeMile: It is hard to recall the exact conversation that took place many years ago, but this is the gist of it. Danny had seen Bruce spar with [them] and said he neutralized everything they tried. Lee's ability to close, trap and shut down

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES DEMILE



Bruce Lee snapped this photo of (left to right) students Ed Hart, LeRoy Garcia, James DeMile and Jesse Glover in 1962.

any attack was amazing. I did not doubt this since I had had personal experience with his skills. Bruce was a street fighter, and they were tournament players. There is a definite difference between the two. I have always been more than happy to explain the differences to those who think that winning trophies and smashing heads are the same thing.

BB: In another interview, you said Lee could have beaten anyone regardless of size and strength. With martial artists now reaching new levels in their training, would Lee have enjoyed the same superiority over them as he did when you knew him?

DeMile: Yes. The reason is what he did and how he did it. Today's fighter is bigger and stronger, yet really does much of the same thing when fighting. It is difficult to explain but easy when doing it in person. A large part of the problem in communicating Bruce's skills is that most people do not understand what a street fight is. It is not a tournament, not the Ultimate Fighting Championship, the K-1 or the Sabaki Challenge. It is Neanderthal. The only goal is to hurt or kill the opponent. It is stupid and mindless, yet it happens every day. Bruce had two levels of action: two seconds or less, and play. That meant the fight was over in a blink, or he played cat and mouse because he had no respect for the person's skills. I do not care how strong you are, what rank you are or what style you are; if you cannot see it coming, you cannot stop it. If, at the other end of that invisible movement was the floating punch, then it was over before it began.

BB: A *wing chun* kung fu instructor named Robert Yeung provided you with insight into the Chinese art. Did he also help you understand the way Lee practiced it?

DeMile: Robert Yeung was a wing chun purist. He lived it and breathed it. He was the first one in line to defend the honor of wing chun. He came to visit me where I was teaching in Honolulu, to find out who this guy was that said he was teaching wing chun. He really came to challenge me. He watched my class and approached me afterward to ask what I was teaching. I said, "Wing chun." Without a smile, he said "No, you're not. You are using the terms of wing chun, but not doing the techniques correctly."

I found this an interesting statement since I had never known anyone but Bruce to practice wing chun. He told me he had trained in Yip Man's school in Hong Kong. At this point, I think Robert became aware that I meant no disrespect but was just ignorant as to what wing chun was. We sat down, and I explained my training with Bruce and his use of the term in our training. Robert explained that Bruce's wing chun training was limited since he only trained for three years. Although very skilled in general applications, he felt Bruce lacked insight into the true art.

Bruce was not really interested in wing chun; he was only interested in fighting. Robert felt this is why Bruce did things so differently. He was very focused and only gleaned the techniques and concepts that had value for him. Bruce's later teaching in America reflected this thought, since he always related to fighting when evaluating a technique or concept. He would teach a technique for a month and suddenly drop it in favor of something else. Robert felt Bruce deserved a lot of credit for his creative insight into the art of fighting; however, Robert was only interested in the art of wing chun and assumed that Bruce used wing chun as a springboard or starting point for his own discoveries.

BB: Had Lee already created an advanced fighting method while still in Seattle?

DeMile: Bruce evolved all through his short life. However,

in those first few years, he discovered his personal answers to be the best fighter. Once discovered, he filed them away and began his quest to create the best martial art. His belief that a fight should not take over two seconds was basic to his discoveries. The longer the fight, the more chance for luck to come into play. Bruce wanted to control the outcome, not hope he was going to be lucky.

One of the most important concepts that Bruce shared with me was that you could become a master of a few techniques, but never a lot. He felt that if you could define the elements of a fight and design techniques to directly overwhelm and control an opponent. His "spring load" was like a bad smell you could not get rid of. Once he touched you, no matter how you twisted or turned, you could not get away from him. The application was to put you into a weak position or angle and keep you there while he thumped on your head.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES DEMILE

The upper left window of Ruby Chow's restaurant in Seattle was part of Bruce Lee's bedroom.

BB: You reportedly taught him hypnosis. How did he use the skill?
DeMile: Bruce did not like the term "hypnosis" but felt that it was a much faster way to access the subconscious than conventional meditation. Hypnosis and meditation both have the same intent: to travel within and use the mental potential to accelerate training. My

"One of the most important concepts that Bruce shared with me was that you could become a master of a few techniques, but never a lot."

them, you were developing the ultimate system. If the total list of techniques did not exceed 10, becoming a master of them was very realistic. I have followed this thought, both in my teaching and my training. I am a good teacher and know my material well, but my students often become better than me in many elements of *wing chun do*. But for my own purposes, I know less than 10 techniques that I have total confidence will wipe out anyone I should have to fight. In my demonstrations, I try to share this concept so people will have some insight as to why Bruce was so effective in his survival skills.

BB: Speaking of survival skills, didn't Lee use to train with firearms as well as with his empty hands?
DeMile: Bruce liked to fire guns. He and Leroy Garcia used to do a lot of shooting. However, I do not believe Bruce *trained* with guns.

BB: Could you explain Lee's "spring load" concept?
DeMile: It was a critical element of Bruce's ability to trap

input was to teach him self-hypnosis and how to develop suggestions in the areas he was concerned with.

BB: There is some confusion about Lee's sharing of the one-inch punch. Many claim to have been taught it, yet you once said he taught it only to you. Are you the only person from the Seattle era to have acquired knowledge of the technique?
DeMile: I do not want to beat my own drum, but Bruce did not teach me the one-inch punch. He and I developed it. That is why I know so many details that make the punch work. In my apartment, we went over and over ways to hit at close range. Robert Yeung said wing chun had a long-range floating punch, but nothing at one or two inches. Bruce knew of the wing chun punch but wanted something that would fit into his close-in trapping techniques. Since I had been a boxer, we experimented with the punching action and then explored different ways to add power. They were two separate elements. The punching action was actually the easy part;

it was how to generate explosive power at an inch or less. Once we accomplished a marriage between the two, Bruce insisted I tell no one. This included Jesse [Glover] and everyone else in the early group. It was no big deal to me. Jesse spent a lot of private time with Bruce, and I am sure knows things the rest of us don't.

I honestly forgot about the punch for many years. I never heard anything from the jun fan or JKD [people] regarding it. Only years later in the early '70s did I hear it mentioned. Bob Wall was on TV in Honolulu talking about being in a recent movie with Bruce. He said that Bruce showed him this punch, then demonstrated it. I was totally blown away. I called the station and asked Bob to stop by. He did, and I asked him to hit me. Then I told him to hit me again, only as hard as he could. It rocked me, but I did not feel the internal roll of energy that I knew was part of the punch. Bob asked me to hit him. I put a phone book to his chest and knocked him across my club and into a wall. He was stunned and said: "That was unbelievable. You should write a book on that." And that is how the *Bruce Lee's One- and Three-Inch Power Punch* book originated. Over the years, I have run across many instructors who profess to know the punch and have never felt one that had the internal reactions of the original.

BB: A rumor holds that you and Lee had a falling out. Is there any truth to that?

DeMile: It is not a rumor; it is true. It was my fault. After I broke away from regular classes, I would go down and visit Bruce in his underground club on King Street. After one of his classes, I was talking to some of the students and they asked why I had stopped training. I mentioned that I felt Bruce was leaving out important pieces of what made things work. Bruce heard about my comments, and when I visited again he confronted me, very uptight, and asked why I said what I did. I told him, and he said I had no right to make comments to his class. I agreed and apologized.

He [started] slapping some gloves into his palm and suggested I was challenging him. He was very upset and seemed to be pushing for a fight. I knew I was on dangerous ground. To fight Bruce when he was calm was insanity, but to do it when he was mad was to invite sudden death. The only amusing memory of the event was that in that period of my life, I carried a gun. I calmly thought to myself that if he leaped at me, I was going to [use it]. As it was, I apologized again, turned and walked out. That was the last time I spoke to him.

About the interviewer: Paul J. Bax is a Bruce Lee historian who hosts an Internet forum on the late action star (http://www.forumco.com/pauljbax). To contact him, send e-mail to pauljbax@aol.com. To contact James DeMile about his art of wing chun do, send e-mail to sijo@wingchundo.com.